

## **An Active Imagination**

By Charles Faulkner

When a client comes into your office, or you go to theirs, what are you looking for? Beyond the obvious things like an income, relieving their suffering, increasing their possibilities, or doing something you've never done before, what is it that *you* want? Another way to ask this is – How do you know what to do? Not the technical aspects of your selected intervention, but the moment before that – when there is that almost unconscious formulation of the situation as “one of those.”

A recent book recommended by the Institute of Directors on hiring Consultants & Advisors warns the reader not to do so when he or she doesn't know what the problem is. Whereas, I think this is among most interesting, and often most effective moment to intervene.

To start again (more specifically), when a client comes in, do you search for repressions, projections, introjections or sublimations? Or are you scanning your client's past for post-traumatic stress or checking to see if they have a foggy future? Or does your taste lean more to organismic wholeness and notions of healing psychosomatic fractionation? Perhaps language therapy is your game, so you communicate more inclusively and monitor the metaphors. Or maybe it's time for a change in perspective or inner lighting. These are just a few of the many ideas of how our 'insides work' and they are all examples of Metaphors in the History of Psychology (also a book by David E. Leary).

So, take a moment (or too) and wander back to wonder what you wanted to see and hear from that client. Most psychologists and psychotherapists are aware of the reticular activating system – when they get a new outfit or a new car. “I never realized there were so many of those around before.” They, and we, are usually much less aware of how much our attention shifts when we are introduced to someone new, and how much where we are introduced affects us. Not done yet? Wandering back ... take another moment and write down some of the key thoughts that occur to you as you first consider the requests of this client again.

These days it's not unusual in hypnotherapy to think that the answer is within, and that it resides in the rearrangement of internal resources, provided of course, this reordering is performed by a trained expert. Perhaps some of the thoughts you wrote down reflect this understanding – words like states, resources, regression or reframing. Or you may work in another way – thinking in terms of inner child or evolution or energy. Whatever way you work, these words signal certain of your assumptions. These assumptions orient your unconscious attention as well as your conscious concepts. If you don't believe it,

return in your memory to that moment with your client and in your mind's eye and ear review the scene for material evidence of the distinctions you were making. Are there visible states or resources? Do you actually see or hear that inner child or whatever? There are certainly shifts in your client's behavior and language, and these may be taken to mean many things. The organizing principles you applied to them, and the meaning you make with them originate with you. To assign specific states or any other assumptions to them is an act of imagination – yours.

First, you can't not do this. None of us can. Meaning making – even everyday meaning making – is creating a correspondence between what were different domains of experience. For example: the physical behavior of looking ahead corresponds with looking into the future; the words “looking up” with positive feelings; something sensed as far away with unattainable, something envisioned as small with insignificant. There are many more of these ‘orientational metaphors’ as they are called in Cognitive Linguistics. They get ‘blended’ with other metaphor schemas to create more abstract concepts like our “higher values,” “time lines” to reaching our goals, and the idea of physical force as the basis for interpersonal influence (“he made me tell her”). These cognitive concepts in turn are collected into higher order abstractions to create common psychological ideas and their organizing principles. In the last century we heard about the hydraulics of the Freudian Libido (“It has to come out somewhere.”), the dance of dualities in Jung's Collective Unconscious, and the rational management schedules of B. F. Skinner's reinforcement among the many competing models of the mind. These few stuck better than the others more for their match with everyday folk psychology than their accuracy or insight. After all, everyone understands “blowing off some steam,” “getting in touch with your feminine (or masculine) side,” and “third time's a charm.”

In the case of your client, you connected your experience of him or her with your own formal or folk psychology about how people work. If you were from a different culture, or another time, you might have attributed the same behavioral cues to very different origins – possibly including possession, electromagnetic particles, or past lives. And some of you may be making those correspondences now.

It's not a question of the accuracy of the ideas, but of an accommodation with the prevailing biases of the times. Unusual correspondences stand out such that their metaphoric origins are revealed. The thinking of whole fields are often nudged in a new direction by them. Metaphors of Mind (also a book by Robert Sternberg) have changed in the last century from the steam engine to the light bulb to the telephone switchboard to the mainframe computer to an ecosystem to a system at the edge of chaos. It's been noted that with each new, more complex creation of man, the mind is recast in terms of it. The ones that are familiar, what are called ‘dead metaphors,’ affect us without our knowing it – at least consciously. For example, the idea of states of mind is as familiar as states of the

union or Europe. The analog is easy to understand. You can enter or leave a state, come to 'feel at home' in certain states, sometimes need special permission to enter a state (which one gets from the appropriate authority), and so on. Whether states of mind are actual places is entirely beside the matter of our minds' following the many social suggestions in the language around us, and acting creatively to make it so. We easily understand when someone says s/he wants to get out of a bad state and into a good one. We do not mistake this for a desire to move from Louisiana to Colorado.

This kind of creativity, for that indeed is what it is, is happening much more often than most of us can realize. Current neuroscience research estimates that 95% of what we think remains unconscious, behind the scenes, before reflection and invisible to introspection. Far from being a libertine libido or a community collective, (remember, these are metaphors) our cognitive unconscious is made of the embodied experiences of our everyday lives. Like the 26 letters of the English alphabet can form an immense number of different words, these everyday experiences are the basis for a wide variety of cognitive concepts. And like our everyday vocabulary, while each of us has certain tones, phrases and rhythms that distinguish us from others, at the same time we all use a lot of ahs, thes, Is, ands, this, that, the other and the rest.

So, it's makes sense that someone of Dr. Milton H. Erickson's exceptional abilities to observe and innovate would notice that each client was constructing his or her own cognitive unconscious trances. Once again, current neuroscience confirms what Dr. Erickson already knew – that contrary to the machine memory metaphor of the computer, we have to recreate our recollections each time we bring them to mind. Each time they are at least a little different and often greatly different from their origin. To remake them again, in a slightly different direction (to use a path metaphor) is no great feat and often leads to a more useful place. To create a new correspondence in the mind of the client, through metaphoric stories, tasks or hypnotic trance is a great leap for which he is justly famous.

Your next client will be arriving soon (-er or later). I wonder how you will experience his or her account as an act of imagination? Before you is someone who possesses complete metaphoric worlds – as well developed as your own. If you pause on that moment of not knowing what to do, no telling (just yet) what you will discover. There are worlds with a word, and "eternity in an hour." "All the time in the world for your unconscious mind ..."

**Charles Faulkner** is an internationally recognized NLP trainer and modeler. He is the author or co-author of 10 titles including the ground-breaking *Metaphors of Identity* (1991), the popular book and audio program *NLP: The New Technology of Achievement* (1994), and the NLP training and coaching game Trimurti (2001). His modelling of futures traders is featured in numerous books – famously, *The New Market Wizards*. Recently married to a UK citizen, he divides his time between the US and the UK, between research and training, and between family and friends. This article is an excerpt from his forthcoming *The Cognitive Unconscious – How Metaphors Shape Our Meaning*.

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## **Our Metaphoric Imagination –**

Mesmerizing Metaphors and Other Tricks of the Hypnotic Mind

To be entranced by language is in our nature. We can 'know' what isn't so, and make its future real. It is our greatest hypnosis – a source of incredible strength and also one of debilitating weakness. At the heart of this is metaphor – the source of our both our abstract reasoning and our fertile imagination. In this experiential program we will explore the mesmerizing power of metaphors in all of its entrancing forms – personal, relational, organizational, and spiritual ... as well as embodied, orientational, conceptual and identity. Through various exercises and analogies we will participate in the recurring, dynamic patterning of our perceptions and motor programs that gives structure and coherence to our not so sensory experience and other tricks of our hypnotic minds.